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Where the Prairie Ends

When the people first saw the prairie, in the early days of the west, they thought it had no ending. "The sea of grass" they called it -- a sea that had no ending. Yet the prairie has its bounderies and the greatest of them all is the great bulk of the Rocky Mountains . . . vast and tall and silent. Here and there, in the shadow of the mountains, you can find the final outposts of the plow and the binder, the last elevators, the fringe of the forests. That's where the prairie ends.

Last week, I went to one of these prairie frontiers -- a town whose story reaches back to the vast beginnings of Western Canada . . . Rocky Mountain House.

Here it was that the Nor-west company built their trading post a century and a half ago to catch the vast flood of beaver skins which went to adorn the gentlemen of Europe. Here it was that David Thompson wintered before his epic trip across the mountains to the fabul us shores of the Pacific. Here it was that the Hudson's Bay Company, before the birth of Queen Victoria, set up their post to trade with the Indians. A house they called it . . . a place to trade from . . . and since it stood right beneath the snowcaps, they called it Rocky Mountain House.

Well, that was all a long time ago. No trace remains of David Thompson . . . and the men of the Nor-west company are almost forgotten. Two old chimneys stand a mile or so west of the town, across the treacherous waters of the Saskatchewan River. They are the sole remains of the Hudson's Bay trading post.

The sole remains? Well, not exactly. Every now and then, the earth

yields up a home-made nail, or rusted gun, a voice of the past. And somewhere in that historic ground is buried treasure . . . treasure indeed -- two brass cannon . . . and a barrel of rum.

Everyone in Rocky Mountain House knows about this buried treasure . . . the story has been handed down to them, and they will pass it on to their children. But nobody goes digging for it, because they don't know where to look. The company made a search a year or so ago . . . not no luck. The people of Rocky Mountain House would be terribly pleased to find that treasure, because they think they would get one of the cannon.

I asked about the barrel of rum, more than a century old, mellowed in the earth . . . what would happen if that was found? They told me the problem had often been discussed, but that no decision could be made till it was found. So much, you see, depends on the size. Besides . . . there may have been a leak.

There are about a thousand people living in the town of Rocky Mountain House, and something like 5,000 more in the general district around it. They get along pretty well . . . as well as any western community . . . and probably better than most. They have plenty of rain, and scarcely any wind. They get good crops most of the time. Last year, grain tickets worth a quarter of a million dollars came into the town.

First of all, there's lumber. At one time, Rocky Mountain House was one of the greatest lumber centres on the continent. Lumber from the mountain slopes built homes and schools and churches the whole length and breath of Western Canada. Lumber went from Rocky as far as New York and Detroit and Chicago. Rocky shipped out ties

to build the railroads, corral-posts for the ranches, pit-props for the coal mines, telephone poles to string across the endless miles of the prairie. The West was booming then. Today, Rocky has settled down to steadier times, shipping out millions of feet every year, going further and further back into the woods to get it.

Some of the camps are pretty far out, deep in the heart of the bush. Nobody calls in and they are inclined to lose track of the time. A traveler showed up at one of these camps the middle of last January. The camp cook greeted him joyfully and asked hom to stay for dinner. The traveller said he was sorry, but he couldn't stay. "Please stay and eat with us", said the cook. "It's mighty cheerful to have a visitor for Christmas dinner!"

Plenty of cattle, poultry and sheep are raised in this grassy country Creamery butter goes to the outside markets. Rocky Mountain House has set aside every Tuesday as "Pig Day". On that day, long columns of pigs converge on the town and go for a ride on the train next morning.

They still ship furs from Rocky. Not so many as they used to in the roaring days, but still something like fifty thousand dollars worth every year. Even the children know how to pick off a weasel or a brush coyote. Squirrel skins are easy to get and easy to trade for pocket money. For older hands, there are lynx and cougar. Each cougar skin rates twenty five dollars bountry money from the Alberta government . . . one man managed to take five in a single night.

Most of Rocky, men dig out steam coal and drill for oil. They have found a huge source of natural gas in the mountains, and there may

be an oil pool there that will put Turner Valley in the shade.

Wild berries come out of Rocky by the crate and the carload. And there comes also from the Indians who live across the river, one of Canada's strangest exports ... seneca root. The seneca root goes to China, where it's made into cough medicine. The Indian ladies bring a lot of it into town, and trade it for bobby pins. One lady brought in enough seneca root to get herself a permanent wave.

One more harvest that comes through Rocky . . . the richest harvest men have reaped -- gold. For 30 years, men have been panning gold in the mountain waters -- not much -- perhaps four dollars a day in the summer. But it has kept many a man independent.

And there IS a sturdy independence in this frontier district. People have come in, even recently, from every nation and every walk of life They have settled down to wrest a living from the wilderness, some of them pioneers from away back. others migrants from the dried-out districts of the prairie. Some of them have failed, and live in bitter hardships. Yet many of them have succeeded, and most of them have managed to get along. Nature provides meat and fruit, plenty of wood for building and burning. Cutting ties and mine-props, trapping furs in the winter, picking berries in the summer, many a family manages to get along without seeing more than fifty dollars cash all year round. For them, it's a hard life -- but one of vigor and independence.

They tell the story -- up there -- of one settler who came to his municipal council for assistance. He wanted enough roadwork to do him till spring. "Well," said the councillor, "that's three months. How much money will you need each month."

"Well," replied the settler, "I could get along nicely on a dollar and a half."

There are plenty of stories like that in Rocky. In this district, you will find a woman who at one time worked in one of Europe's royal households. She came out here with her husband to make a living in the early days. She farmed with oxen, cleared bush with an axe, and pumped water, by hand, for 85 head of cattle. Now she's one of the district's honored pioneers.

Here also you may find a former officer in the Russian Imperial Army He fled that country at the time of the revolution, and came to live in a log bunkhouse at Rocky. He did not have a nickel in the world. Today, he and his wife have their own farm of 160 acres, and live in some degree of comfort.

Here's the story of one man who came to Rocky five years ago. He had nothing to staty on but two dollars woth of groceries. So he made a deal to cut cordwood in return for a team, some traps and a gun. That winter, he says, he cut down half the trees in Canada. But he got his equipment. Next, he needed a dollar to buy garden seeds. So he walked twelve miles into Rocky and persuaded the Chinese laundryman to give him a dollar's worth of work. He went on like that for a year or two. Now he makes a fair living, and he has done it all by himself.

Many of the children in this big district are completely isolated. They attend school by correspondence course. Telephones and tap water and electric ligh are beyond their understanding. Their only link with the outside world is the radio, but many of the things they hear on it mean little to them. What does the word "train" mean to a child who has never seen one?

Yet they have a busy life -- veritable children of the wilderness. They have adventures and excitement that Winnipeg and Calgary children can only dream of.

A frontier community naturally attracts the occasional hermit or rugged individualist. Rocky is no exception. One of their most independent residents is John Eagle, who set up his home in the branche of a tree. ; because "a man likes to have a place where nobody bothers him."

All these things are the essence of life at Rocky, and naturally enough, this vigor and independence has been carried into the life of the community. A couple of years back, they decided that the towm needed its own hospitall. The women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church was willing to put one up, if the people of the community raised a share of the expenses . . . $4,000. Dances and socials provided most the money. But more was needed. So they raffled off three quarter-sections of land. Tickets were sold all over Western Canada, and they raised over $500 in this way alone. Today, they have a fine 25-bed hospital.

That's only one example; there aredozens more like it. I'll pick one out that seems important at the moment. They are going to hold a community auction there this week, for the Canadian Red Cross. Al the goods have been donated, and the people who attend will have a chance to pick up almost anything from a mine-prop to a purebred ram. The prices will certainly be good, if past history means anything. For Rocky Mountain House hold some kind of a world's record in this regard. I'm thinking of a box lunch social held there in the early days of the town, for some worthy cause or other. One particular lunch was the subject of furious bidding, and everybody

gasped when it at last was sold.

It was just an ordinary cardboard box; there was nothing much inside, but cheese and crackers. But the autioneer knocked it down for one hundred and twenty seven dollars.